

Lifelong learning through adult literacy and basic education

Shin Min-sun (Seoul Women's University)

1. Introduction

On September 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the resolution, “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.” This historical document represents a global commitment to achieving, by the year 2030, 17 Sustainable Development Goals with 169 targets for the sustainable development of humankind, leaving no one behind

Of the 17 goals, SDG 4 aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. Targets 4.1 to 4.7 of this goal emphasize the need for equal access to free, quality primary and secondary education; quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education; and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university. Target 4.6 particularly aims to ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy by 2030. The indicator for this target is the proportion of the population achieving at least a fixed level of proficiency in functional literacy and numeracy skills. While the previous global development agenda, the Millennium Development Goals, focused on mobilizing global efforts to reduce poverty, and increase human and social development in developing countries, the SDGs are committed to inclusive and equitable quality education with an agenda of learning that is lifelong.

Yet, according to a report analyzing the participation of adults in learning and education in terms of equality and inclusion, 19% of all 152 surveyed countries reported spending less than 0.5% of the total education budget on adult learning and education, while 14% reported spending less than 1%. (Korean National Commission for UNESCO, 2020). This confirms that quality lifelong learning is a rarely provided opportunity in adult learning and education. According to data collected in the third round of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, 51% of adults in Mexico, 71% of adults in Peru and 72% of adults in Ecuador in 2017 scored below the basic proficiency level of literacy, while the figures for the United States showed 27.6% of adults with numeracy below the basic proficiency level from 2012 to 2014, a number that increased to 29.2% in 2017. (UNESCO, 2021)

Although the data show that 86% of adults and 92% of youth worldwide can read and write, the reality and future of adult literacy paint a bleak picture for achievement of SDG4.

What about South Korea? This is a country with a history as one of the poorest countries in the world, and aid recipient status. When, however, it became a member of the Development Assistance Committee

on January 1st, 2010, South Korea officially became a donor country. It is often touted as an exemplary case for global development cooperation, especially for its rarity: South Korea is the only country that has transformed itself from being an aid recipient to a donor country. (Korea Policy Briefing)

While it has achieved significant economic growth with its uncommon passion for education, South Korea only really began to pay attention to lifelong education after the Lifelong Education Act came into being in 1999, following a complete revision of what had been the Social Education Act, originally enacted in 1982, and its renaming as the Lifelong Education Act. A project organized by the Ministry of Education to develop lifelong learning cities seems to have served as a catalyst for extending South Korea's understanding of education, from school-centered education to lifelong learning for adults. The Ministry of Education started by designating Gwangmyeong, Jinan, and Yuseong as the first group of lifelong learning cities in 2001. Fast forwarding to today, there are now 181 designated lifelong learning cities as of 2021, more than 75% of the total 226 local governments in South Korea. The project has played a pivotal role in laying the foundation for adult lifelong learning.

In this policy context, there has also been gradual progress in literacy education. There has been an official policy adoption of credential recognition to enable adults to and obtain primary and secondary educational credentials by accessing local literacy classes, without having to go to school or take qualification exams. An Adult Literacy Survey conducted by National Institute for Lifelong Education in 2017 showed that approximately 3.1 million adults over the age of 18 – accounting for 7.2% of the total adult population – are illiterate, indicating an inability to read, write or do basic calculations in their everyday life. Moreover, 5.17 million adults over the age of 20 have attained only a low level of education, less than the level of compulsory lower-secondary education. This population – representing 13.1% of the total adult population – is the target for literacy education. (Ministry of Education and National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2021) As noted above, 19% of the 152 countries surveyed by the Korean National Commission for UNESCO for its 2020 report spend less than 0.5% of their education budgets on adult learning and education, and South Korea is no exception in this respect¹. Thus, the level of literacy in the country could be regarded as quite an achievement.

Not long ago, however, EBS TV², an educational broadcasting channel, covered the reality of South Korea's literacy, suggesting that the actual illiteracy rate in South Korea is 75%. That is to say, 7 out of 10 adults in South Korea do not really understand what they read. The point was that the headline figure

¹ The Ministry of Education's budget for lifelong and vocational education for adults aged 19 or older is KRW 532,433,000, which is 0.76% of the total education budget. Most of the education budget remains concentrated on the education of school-age students aged 0 to 18 (Ministry of Education, 2020)

² EBS Future Education Plus 'Literacy, the Base for Learning' Part 1. Why is literacy important? (Aired on Feb 25, 2021 on EBS)

does not tell the whole story, and that reading is different from understanding. The high level of education in South Korea does not necessarily mean that people have truly attained academic skills.

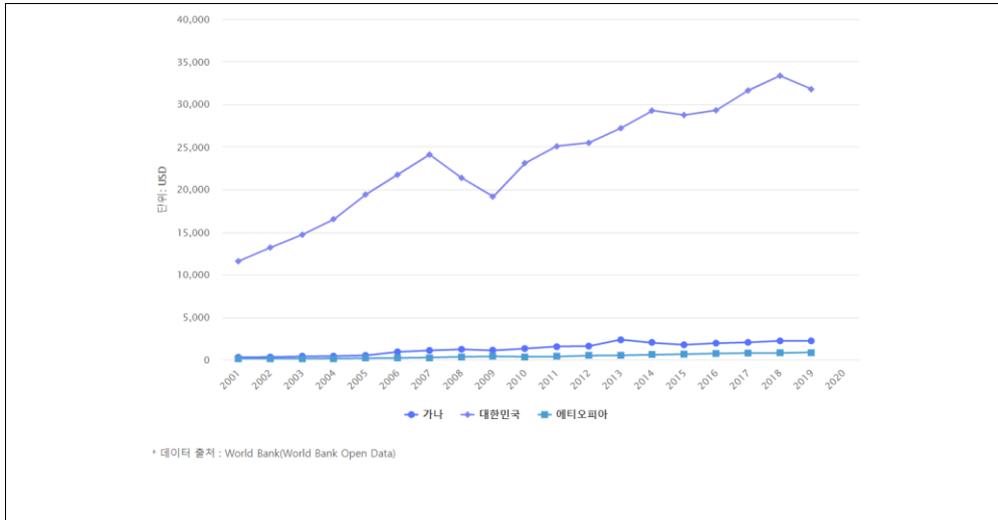
What can we make of this phenomenon and how can we interpret the discrepancy between knowing how to read, write and count and really understanding, in terms of lifelong learning? This paper begins with consideration of these questions. It will examine the current state of education in South Korea, which as a donor country has comparative advantage over developing countries. It will then discuss the future direction of lifelong learning, and identify educational strategies for strengthening literacy education in developing countries.

2. Korean society – worries about life

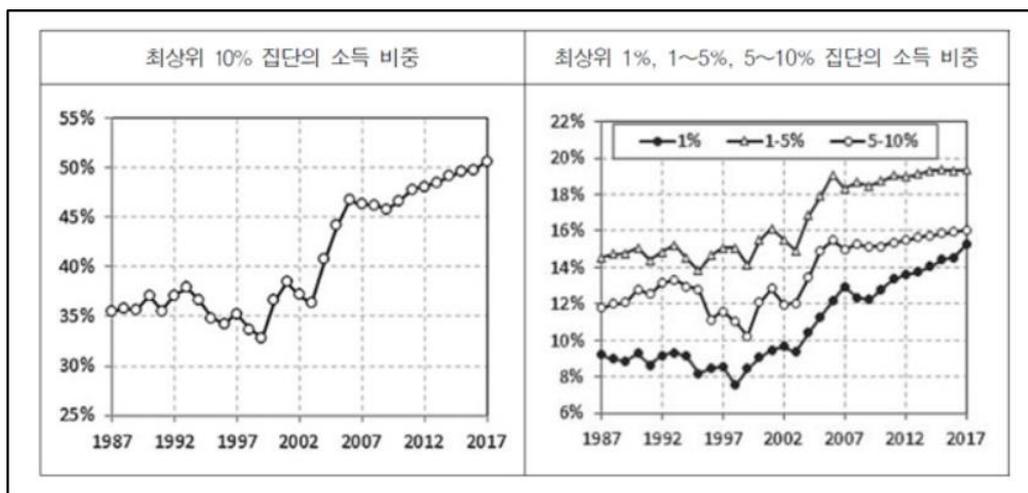
Concerns are growing about the lives of youth in South Korea. High school students are barely holding their lives together, trying not to fall off the tightrope they are walking. How about young adults? Their future revolves around a new social phenomenon where college students put off graduation because landing a job is tougher than ever. They have become used to an unfair society where people are classified into permanent and temporary workers, and young adults are stigmatized as losers in a society where Seoul is the only place that dreams can come true. Even married couples do not dare to have children for fear that they might not be able to raise them properly, resulting in a tumbling birth rate. The government's attempts to address this with various new policies have little effect, with young people firmly convinced that raising a child in such a society is no easy task, and some not wanting to pass down the pain they are going through to another generation.

The senior population also face difficulties. According to future population growth estimates by Statistics Korea, the aging index in South Korea, defined as the number of elders per 100 children, is 138.8 as of 2021. The number is expected to increase to 272.4 in 2031, nearly doubling the burden on young people in 10 years. The population aged 0 to 18 as of December 2020 was 8,335,320, which accounts for 16.23% of the total population, while the number of adults aged 19 or older was 43,013,940, 83.77% of the total population. South Korea is now undeniably an aging society. And how are people's later years? Unfortunately, I have never met a single person who proudly said they were ready for old age. The poverty rate among the elderly in South Korea stood at 43.4% as of 2018, three times the OECD average of 14.8%, according to OECD statistics. This means one in every two elderly people we bump into on the street. Some older people have gotten down to preparing for their later years and are busy studying at lifelong learning institutes to acquire new qualifications. We are living in a world where lifelong learning works something like insurance. Lifelong learning, in theory, emphasizes the right to be happy and to learn, but the reality is something else. It is a self-rescue measure for an uncertain old age or an expected deficiency.

Turning our eyes to economic growth, the per capita GDP in 2019 was USD 31,761. It has grown massively compared to developing countries such as Ghana, at USD 2,202.12, and Ethiopia, at USD 771.52.

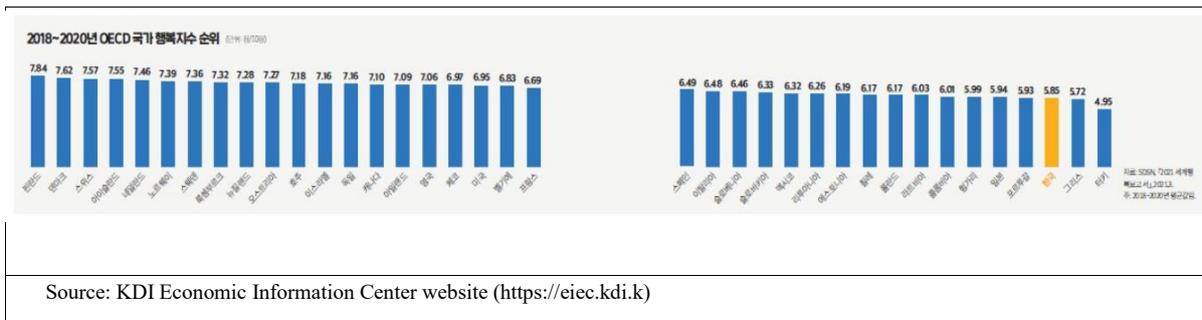


There is, however, another side to this story of economic growth: unequal income distribution. The top 10% of income earners account for more than 50% of the total, while the top 1% has seen a steep rise in their share of the pie.



Source: Korea Labor Institute (2019). Monthly Labor Review, Feb 2019

The Korea Development Institute's Economic Information Center concluded (as of 2021) that South Korea's national happiness index from 2018 to 2020 averaged 5.85 out of 10, the lowest among OECD countries despite the country being the world's 10th largest economy. South Korea ranked 62nd out of 149 surveyed countries and 35th out of 37 OECD countries.



Perhaps, for many of South Koreans, this world is not a good place to live in. 40% of adults aged 25 to 79 were participating in lifelong learning as of 2020 (Ministry of Education and National Institute for Lifelong Education, 2021), which presents an increase compared to the past, but what is also growing is fear about life.

3. Raising doubts on growthism

Since World War II, we have always based our standards for economic and technological growth on the models of developed countries. In other words, our view of recipient countries as a donor country was that the experience of developed countries is always right. Moreover, the value that Koreans placed on higher education contributed significantly to the economic growth of South Korea, whose experience then became a benchmark model for developing countries.

The dramatic growth of GDP, as a measure of macroeconomic operation, has certainly helped pump up South Korea’s national power compared to other countries, and it does also have meaning as a symbol of an increase in South Koreans’ standards of living. But there are very obviously certain areas of life that have long been compromised as a result of rapid economic growth, such as pollution, resource depletion, health threats, inequality, crime and broken families to name just a few. The COVID-19 pandemic is also a disastrous outcome caused by disruption in the ecosystem.

Lifelong learning for adults is becoming a tool for survival and education for students at school age is a tool for surviving the college entrance exam. These facts are a clear demonstration that it is time for South Korea to look back on the results of growth-centered education and ask where it has got us. We must question whether education as a tool for competition should be reproduced in developing countries. It is imperative that we now systematically discuss and plan how lifelong learning can contribute to real literacy and a mature society where mental and cultural maturity are valued over ambition for figurative growth.

Slum Dwellers International, a network of community-based organizations founded in 1996, resisted business interests that aimed to turn Dharavi, the largest slum area in Mumbai, into commercial facilities

and luxury apartment complexes. They suggested developing public toilets as an alternative, leveraging the foundation of the local community and their outside network. The idea may not be the most efficient option in terms of economic benefits but certainly rests on the need of local dwellers for improved housing, and a hygiene and drainage system. The organization insisted that “even the poor have a global civic network.”

Our education, thus far, has focused on taking as many courses and acquiring as much knowledge as possible in a short stretch of time, leaving teachers with little choice but to adopt instructor-centered methods of teaching and resort to rote-learning. The most effective option of evaluating performance in a short period of time was multiple choice questions. This resulted in a classroom where a single professor monopolizes the whole course while learners passively take in whatever has been delivered. Is this the best it can be? The question is for us whether this method is the best we can do to achieve educational growth in recipient countries.

It is imperative that we consider an approach for education that respects the potential and voices of developing countries. The approach must be to move away from one-way support from donor countries and uphold aid recipients’ own contributions, alternative ideas and self-made blueprints for the future. Reaching a goal ever faster is not the intention. Even at a slower pace, pursuing a learning society with fewer poor and more better-off people should be the way forward.

4. Let them talk for themselves

In the *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacques Ranciere emphasizes that “explicating”, the traditional behavior of teachers, is “stultifying” for learners. Using the story of Professor Joseph Jacotot, a real-life case, Ranciere insisted that explicating is an act aimed at revealing the ignorance and incompetence of students, and convincing them of the teachers’ superiority of knowledge and intelligence. Pointing out that explication posits inequality between teachers and learners, Ranciere reiterated that teachers of intellectual equality are not those who instill knowledge but those who strengthen the student's will and self-confidence to learn independently, even things that the teachers themselves do not have knowledge of.

Along similar lines, Paulo Freire criticizes the obsession with explication in education using the “banking concept,” where students simply store the information relayed to them by the teacher.

He also classified pedagogy (the teaching of children) and andragogy (the teaching of adults) as follows:

	Pedagogy (School education)	Andragogy (Adult learning)
Practice of teaching-learning	Teaching	Learning
Learner	Student	Learner
Teacher	Teacher	Facilitator
Teaching method	Lecture	Discussion, Problem-solving
Learning material	Standardized	Flexible depending on reality
Motivation for learning	Extrinsic	Intrinsic

Pedagogy emphasizes the practice of teaching in teaching and learning activities, thereby requiring lecture-style teaching and standardized learning materials. On the other hand, andragogy highlights self-directed learning by learners rather than practice of teaching. Teachers are defined as those who assist learners in their learning activities. Discussion and problem-solving are preferred over lectures, while learning materials are flexible and changeable according to the real-life context. Above all, the biggest difference between pedagogy and andragogy is the motivation for learning. Pedagogy is influenced by external motives. For instance, it is a legal duty for South Koreans to attend elementary school at the age of 8, and move on to middle school after spending 6 years in elementary school. Andragogy, on the other hand, is affected by intrinsic motives. Learners do not have to engage in learning activities unless intrinsically motivated to learn. That is why adult learning sites are always charged with passion and excitement compared to high school classrooms. Adult learners are there because they want to be.

The pictures below, however, do not tell the difference between pedagogy and andragogy. The learners in each picture are in different age groups, but the practice of learning and teaching appear the same.



Source: News1Korea
<https://news.v.daum.net/v/20151012132358320>



Source: Kyongbuk Ilbo – Goodday Goodnews
<http://www.kyongbuk.co.kr>

The transfer of knowledge from teacher to learner still seems to be the most critical objective of

education. The following story is another reminder of the ideal goal of learner-centered lifelong learning underlined by Jacque Ranciere and Paulo Freire.

Jang Il-soon, a social activist in South Korea, said after seeing the messy handwriting of a sweet-potato street vendor who he bumped into on the street one evening.

“That handwriting looks messy but it is real while mine is dead handwriting. In other words, mine is fake and nothing more than a joke.”

- Quoted from the Universe in a Grain of Rice written by Jang Il-soon

Similarly, the late pastor Huh Byung-seop, who established the Dowgwol Church in a hillside slum and engaged himself in pastoral activity for the local community, sought to engage local residents in meetings and programs to discuss their difficulties in life and raise awareness about them. He worked to capture their attention and inspire their understanding of the value and worth of their community, from a firm believing that the poor, uneducated and marginalized also have the ability to reason, feel and judge, and that this is where education and developmental behaviors start. The pastor’s acts of education were a direct protest against the norm of education, whose main practice was to overwhelm marginalized residents with the existing logic of the vested interests. It was also a clear demonstration that education and learning exist in people’s everyday lives.

5. From a passive beneficiary to an active citizen

UNESCO has set out the value and vision for lifelong learning through four pillars: Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Live, and Learning to Be. The four pillars underscore a goal of learning which goes far beyond a simple transfer of knowledge. It highlights the value of learning not just as a tool for self-growth but as a means of pursuing change within the community and seeking consistency between life and the learning about existential life.

On Dec 9th, 20218, elderly learners in Chilgok-gun, South Korea, were featured in a TV program. A choir of elderly women in Taepyeong Village, Chilgok-gun offered living testimony that “Having opened my eyes to the alphabet, I finally get to see the world.” Originally, the villages elderly women had come together to form a choir and put on performances. After learning how to read the Korean alphabet, they formed the Laundry Choir, becoming well-known in the region. The choir now gives musical performances with a touch of dramatic flair. Their choir is a little different from other choirs.

“A story I heard as a young kid became our choir song. It’s a song we used to hum when we were too poor to eat or buy nice clothes, and rice porridge and bran cakes were our staples. I will never

forget the song.” said Kim Bong-i (aged 84 at the time of interview)

“Old man, dried persimmon, wake up. Mill the barley and steam the bran cakes. A little too many bran cakes in a pot. Cold wind in the old man’s nose and warm steam in the bran cake pot” quoted from the lyrics of Old Man and Dried Persimmon

The song is not made for everyone to sing but made of their life stories. The lyrics comparing the warm steam from the bran cakes and cold wind in the old man’s nostrils is a resonant reflection of their lives in hardship. Seo Geum-ja (aged 73 at the time of interview) married a man from Taepyeong Village at the age of 20 and had a hard life trying to make ends meet, but in singing, she recalls her memories of her warmhearted father-in-law, who had great affection for his daughter-in-law.



The example of these elderly women in Chilgok-gun, who incorporated aspects of their lives into their learning, can be found in an expanded version in the literacy education and lifelong learning goals of the ReFLECT program.

Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community (‘ReFLECT’) is a program for adult literacy education that rests on the pedagogy theory of Paulo Freire. ReFLECT’s main concept and philosophical ideal is raising the consciousness of learners. The program is committed to empowering women in the local community, raising their consciousness by doing so. In 1993, Action Aid began a new study using Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), which served as the starting point for ReFLECT. The program was first introduced in Nepal in 1995, and has been working there ever since, enhancing the literacy of Nepalese women and so empowering them. The program has also been initiated in over 100 villages, covering about 1,550 women and 420 men, in Uganda, El Salvador, and Bangladesh. (Kim Gye-shin, 2019)

Through ReFLECT, reading books is translated into reading the world. Thus, the program is committed to embracing the entire process of seeking final action through dialogue, questioning, and

discussion. Most female learners who have participated in the program improve their literacy skills and confidence through study and a developing awareness of their circumstances, and enhance their ability to take part in public life through positive social interactions. It has been found that women develop solidarity through learning and become more willing to voice their opinions.³

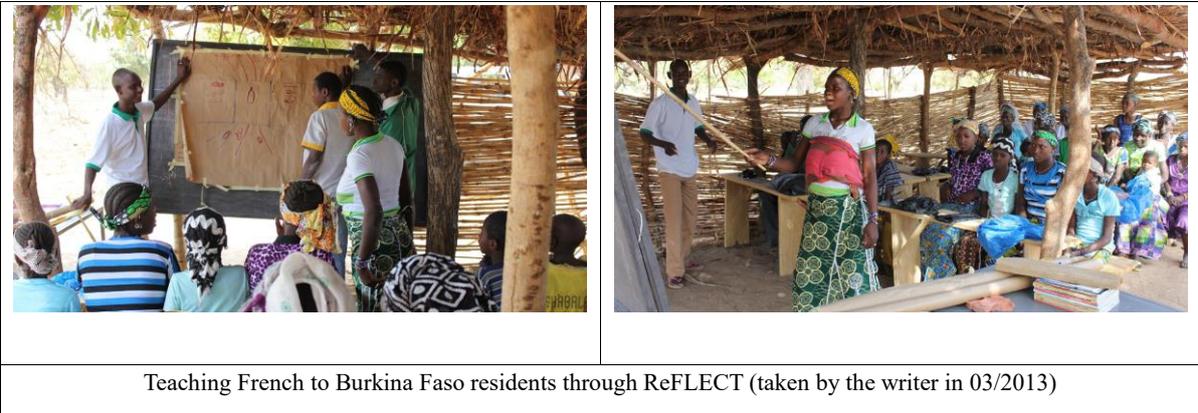


Another case in point is Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in the world, where literacy and skills education, together with microloans, have helped alleviate poverty among rural women. Scarce opportunities for education mean that women in rural Burkina Faso have low literacy skills, rendering them stuck in a social structure encroached upon by poverty and gender inequality.

With the assistance of ReFLECT, Educators Without Borders provided a 12,000-hour course of literacy education to learners in Burkina Faso, which helped them to pass the government's literacy test and take part in learning for technology and vocational skills. Poultry farming specialists were dispatched from South Korea to advise women on agricultural skills and provide them with microloans. This resulted in increased capacities in local communities and the establishment of organizations such as producers' co-ops. Moreover, 89.4% of literacy learners passed the government's literacy test, and each household achieved an average financial return of 160%. Beyond literacy, this education changed the gender relations in families and villages, resulting in fewer instances of domestic violence and disputes, and an increase in the authority and financial independence of women.⁴

³ Reference from YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obYX_IqnHuk

⁴ <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/poverty-alleviation-empowering-women-through-literacy-campaign-skill-training-and>



This case has been selected as an example of SDG Good Practices by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Beyond ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education as part of SDG 4, this project also contributed to the achievement of SDG 1, to “end poverty in all its forms and everywhere”, SDG 5, to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”, and SDG 8 on “decent work and economic growth.”

6. Conclusion

In closing, I would like briefly to offer three points to consider regarding the overall goal of lifelong learning through literacy and basic education. The first is the principle of bilateralism. We often delude ourselves that helping someone is a good deed, and therefore, whatever I do with the intention of helping is a good deed. Is it really? It is time that we reflect on our practical implementation of lifelong learning. Is it mere indoctrination via an instructor’s authority; without attempting to unlock a learner’s potential and opinions? The second point to consider is the principle of the learner’s eye-level. Donor countries have the intention of bringing learners in developing countries to their own eye-level. But the story of “The Fox and The Stork” in Aesop’s fables tells us that adjusting one’s eye-level to that of one’s counterpart is a sign of respect and appreciation. Our educational efforts should not be about making the other’s eye-level match ours, but making our eye-level match theirs. The third point for consideration is the principle of incompleteness. Extreme kindness can not only harm oneself but can cause as much discomfort to the other person as rudeness. Donor countries often intend to provide complete education services to the learners in recipient countries. When a recipient country is later left without the presence

of the donor country, the absence is felt greatly. It is important that we remind ourselves of the virtue of incompleteness. Incompleteness triggers effort to fill the blank.

In this paper, we looked at the status of South Korea as a donor country with a competitive advantage in education compared to developing countries and discussed the ideal values of lifelong learning and strategies to enhance literacy education in developing countries.

Now is the time to use our imagination on education and develop an educational approach that prioritizes active citizens. The line between one-way benefit and reciprocity will finally settle into its proper position when beneficiaries take the active role and transcend the limitations imposed by a provider's authority.

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